Wiley Sparks Experienced Many Changes in Fairbury Area

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Wiley Sparks was one of the early settlers in the Fairbury area. The Sparks family first came to America in the early 1700s to Maryland. The family story of Wiley Sparks began with the birth of his father, Sanford Sparks, in 1808 in Ohio. Sanford Sparks married Emily Redman in 1828 in Brown County, Ohio. Sanford was 20, and Emily was 16 when they married. Sanford and Emily Sparks had six children.

Thomas Wiley Sparks, commonly referred to as Wiley Sparks was born in 1847 in Ohio. In late 1848, the Sanford and Emily Sparks family emigrated from Ohio to the village of Avoca north of present-day Fairbury. Wiley Sparks was 16 months old and came in a covered wagon with his family to the small settlement of Avoca.

The William McDowell family was one of the earliest families to settle in the Fairbury area in 1832. The McDowell family established the village of Avoca on Indian Creek, about five miles north of Fairbury.

When the Sanford and Emily Sparks family arrived in Avoca, it was a thriving little village with several stores, a hotel, a shingle mill, a church, and a cemetery. Bluff and Clark Streets were the east-west streets, and State and Main Streets were the north-south streets. The Sparks family lived next to the hotel in Avoca.

Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border. The founding of Fairbury on the new railroad was the death knell for the little village of Avoca. People began to immediately move their Avoca village houses to either Fairbury or McDowell. The Sanford and Emily Sparks family continued to live in Avoca after Fairbury was founded.

Wiley Sparks married Emily DeMoss in 1866. Emily's family were also pioneer settlers in Avoca Township. Wiley was 18, and Emily was 17 when they were married. Wiley and Emily Sparks had eleven children. Wiley Sparks continued to live in Avoca for the rest of his life.

The hotel in Avoca was dismantled. Part of the hotel was used to make the house Wiley Sparks lived in. Another piece of the hotel was taken to Fairbury and used to build a home at the southeast corner of Seventh and Hickory Streets. In 1930, Mrs. Edward Skinner lived in this home, and the street address was 513 E. Hickory Street. This house was eventually torn down sometime after 1930.

In January 1888, the Blade published a short question-and-answer paragraph with Avoca news. The Blade asked, "Why does Wiley Sparks now step higher than a blind horse in tall grass?" The answer was that Wiley Sparks had become a grandpa last Tuesday. Wiley

Sparks was 41 years old when this article was written. Horses were terrified of snakes hiding in the tall grass and stepped high when walking through tall grass.

Emily Sparks, the wife of Wiley Sparks, died in 1905 at the age of 57. Mrs. Sparks was buried in the Avoca Cemetery. Wiley Sparks was 58 years of age when his wife died.

In August of 1914, the Blade reported that Wiley Sparks had his arm broken just above the elbow in a farming accident. Wiley was assisting in the shelling of corn at the J. C. Meis home and was oiling the sheller just before starting. The machinery was accidentally triggered, catching his arm in a belt. Wiley was 67 when this farming accident occurred.

Before the Social Security system was implemented and the first check was issued to Ida May Fuller in 1940, most men continued to work as long as they could after they reached age 65.

In September of 1924, Wiley Sparks was 77 years of age. The Blade reported that while Wiley Sparks was driving a load of coal through town, his horse team became frightened and ran away. The wagon struck the traffic post at the intersection of Main and First Streets, breaking it off and dumping most of the coal on the street. Mr. Sparks escaped without injury, but the wagon was severely damaged.

In late August of 1928, the Fairbury area experienced a severe rain and electrical storm on a Wednesday night between nine and eleven PM. Lightning struck the Wiley Sparks home north of Fairbury and damaged the home.

In May 1930, a fire started in the chicken brooder stove in an outbuilding at the Wiley Sparks farm. The fire destroyed some outbuildings on the farm. Through the hard work of the firefighters, the house was saved.

Wiley Sparks died on July 11, 1930, at the age of 83. He was buried in the Avoca Cemetery. Because he was such a well-known figure in the Fairbury area, the Blade published an extensive obituary for Wiley Sparks. The obituary noted that when Wiley came to Avoca in 1848, much of the land in the Fairbury area was swampy, and there was no local railroad. As a boy, Wiley saw the start of Fairbury in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border. Wiley saw Fairbury grow dramatically in population while the village of Avoca quickly disappeared.

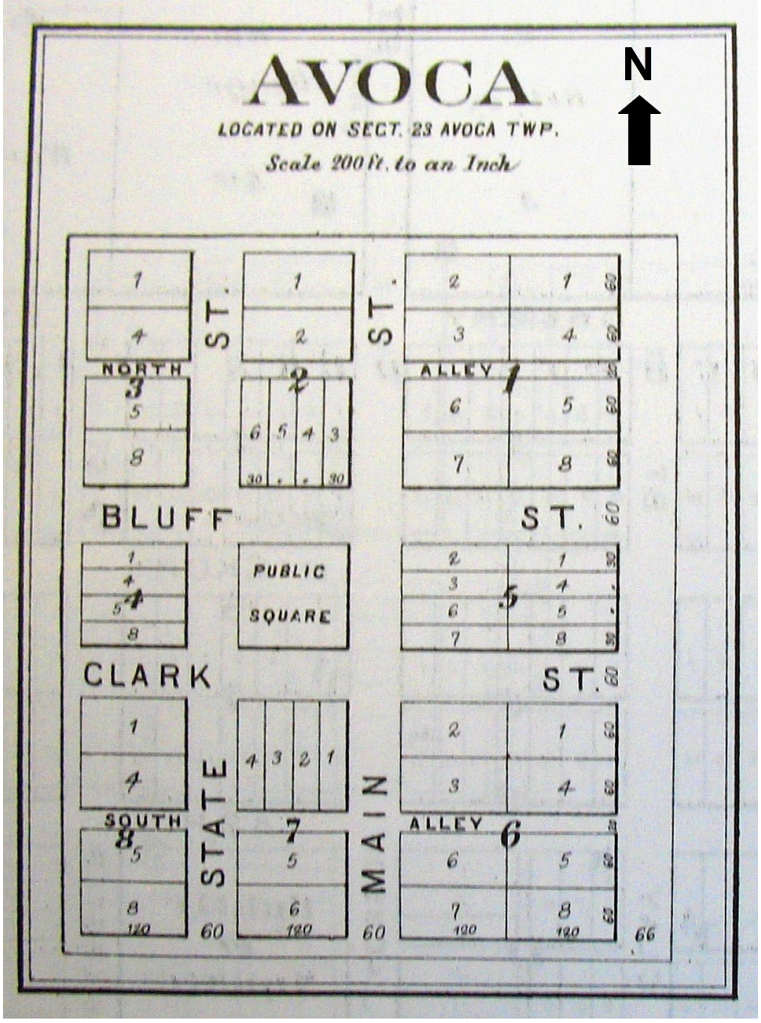
Wiley Sparks also saw the un-productive swampy land in the Fairbury area transformed into some of the most productive land on the planet when clay field tiles were installed to drain the ground in the 1880s. Wiley also lived through the transition from horse-based transportation to automobiles. Wiley saw the agricultural system being transformed from horses to tractors.

There are still many descendants of Wiley Sparks living in the United States. One of the eleven children of Wiley Sparks was Virgil Ray "Jack" Sparks (1889-1953). Jack Sparks

married Phoebe Jennie Frances Schlicher in 1919. Jack was 30, and Phoebe was 21 when they married. Jack and Phoebe Sparks had six children.

One of the children of Jack and Phoebe Sparks was Glenn Allen Sparks. Glenn Sparks was born in 1920. In 1943, Glenn Sparks married Elva Jean Weakman. Glenn was 22, and Elva was 19 when they married. Glenn and Elva Sparks had five children. Glenn Sparks worked at Honegger's and was a well-known Fairbury citizen. Glenn died in 1994 at the age of 74.

The Sparks family were pioneer settlers of the Fairbury area. Wiley Sparks experienced all of the dramatic changes in the Fairbury area. These changes included the first railroad, Fairbury's founding, the decline of Avoca village, and the transition from horses to internal combustion engines in transportation and farming.



Street map of village of Avoca from 1893 Atlas of Livingston County.

Photo of Wiley Sparks published in the Blade with his 1930 obituary.